

saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; for their works follow with them."

And now the harvest has come: "And I saw, and behold, a white cloud; and on the cloud I saw one sitting like unto a son of man, having on his head a golden crown, and in his hand a sharp sickle" (v. 14). There is first the ingathering of the saints by the Lord Himself (vv. 15, 16). Then follows the vintage of judgment, committed to the angel who had power over fire (vv. 19, 20).

Thus the mighty conflict is to end in the triumph of the Lamb over all the powers of evil, a triumph so vividly set forth in this marvellous preparatory vision that the heart of the seer who writes and the saints who read the word of this prophecy may be reassured before the seven angels with the seven last plagues shall pour their vials on the earth.

J. MONRO GIBSON.

THE STAR OF THE MAGI.

The Editor of the EXPOSITOR has kindly forwarded to me the following interesting letter from a correspondent in Calcutta:

I have read with great interest Mr. Canton's article on the Nativity in your February number, and it seems to me that there is much to be done yet for the elucidation of the Bible by bringing to bear upon it the historical and poetical imagination of such minds as his. But has not his imaginative insight failed him in two points connected with the journey of the Wise Men? He justly takes exception to the expression "star in the east." All stars rise in the east and set in the west. But it does not appear to me that we are compelled to fall back upon the explanation "in its rising," which conveys little more of a definite sense than the other. St. Matthew says nothing about a star in the east. He says twice that the Wise Men *saw it* in the east

(ii. 2, 9)—*i.e.*, they were in the east when they saw it. Again, he says nothing about it going before them on their journey from the east to Jerusalem. Such a guiding is scarcely conceivable, because in so moving it would have followed the same course as all the rest of the stars, and they would have had no indication that a special guidance was intended. His narrative implies (ii. 9) that after their first sight of the star it disappeared, and they did not see it again till they were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, when it went before them on a road which leads almost due south. Such a course could not have been taken by any of the planets or fixed stars. I should therefore regard this second appearance as almost certainly meteoric; and when St. Matthew says that this was "the star which they saw in the east," he either means that the first appearance was also meteoric, or he is speaking from the Wise Men's point of view, and means that the meteor seemed to them to be the same star. On this latter supposition it is quite possible that the first appearance was one of those conjunctions of planets to which Kepler called attention.

I trust Mr. Canton will forgive these suggestions (necessarily belated) towards an emendation of his admirable paper. It has a special interest for us missionaries, whose privilege it is often to go over the facts of the gospel and strive to bring them home to the imagination of their hearers.

Calcutta.

E. F. B.

I should be glad if E. F. B.'s suggestions were to elicit the views of writers less inadequately qualified than myself to speak on this interesting subject. Still there are a few points on which I should like to attempt an answer.

It is scarcely possible to read St. Matthew's account of the Magi, and to regard it, not as a beautiful legend blossoming out of the devotion of the early Church, but as a simple historic incident, without asking how far science puts us in a position to explain the marvellous part of the story without having recourse to a miracle for which there appears to be no warrant in the text.

The statements and indications in the first twelve verses of chapter ii. are so few and so brief that ample scope is

allowed for surmise and conjecture ; but while it is quite legitimate to exercise the realistic imagination, one cannot too strongly insist on the necessity of surrendering no single particle of the evidence with which the Evangelist has furnished us, of giving full value to every statement and indication, and of resisting the temptation to warp facts—just a little—in order to work out some particular theory.

Speaking as an average layman, I fear that the details in St. Matthew's account are not sufficiently explicit to warrant a reader in putting forward any particular theory as conclusive ; but it does appear to me that, if we are to believe the story of the Nativity at all, the astronomical conjectures briefly indicated in my article are of such a character that, without having recourse to the miraculous on the one hand, and without setting at defiance the laws of astronomy on the other, any one who reads the Gospel in its obvious sense may accept the scanty record of the star of the Magi with a tranquil and undivided mind.

It is possible that the star may have been spiritual and subjective—a divine light mysteriously guiding the steps of the eastern sages ; but I do not think it possible to believe that St. Matthew took that view of the phenomenon. Such an explanation is out of keeping with the frankness and straightforward simplicity of his narrative.

It is possible that while the star seen in the east was a conjunction of planets or a perfectly natural luminary, the light which guided them from Jerusalem to Bethlehem was a providential meteor ; but obviously St. Matthew was not aware of any such distinction. The star of Bethlehem was “the star which they saw in the east.”

It is possible that the star seen in the east and the star which stood over the house at Bethlehem were both meteors. But on what hypothesis are we to imagine that those Oriental star gazers recognised in a supernatural meteor the token of a child born King of the Jews ? It is strange that

they should have associated even a conjunction of planets with so specific an incident, but we do know that there was an old tradition, which may have been derived from the Chaldeans, that connected such a conjunction with the coming of the Messiah. Furthermore, why should we tax our faith with a miraculous interposition so extraordinary as this meteoric phenomenon would have been? For, though St. Matthew "says nothing" about the star going before the Magi during their journey from the east, what reason have we to doubt that it did so? It was in this wise that the early Church read the story; it was read in this wise for centuries by artists, and poets, and theologians, and simple, devout souls whose only guide was their natural sense of the congruous; it was told in this wise by the Evangelist himself, for there appears to me to be no justification whatever for E. F. B.'s assertion that the "narrative implies (ii. 9) that after their first sight of the star it disappeared, and they did not see it again till they were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem." If ever there was a time when there was no need for guidance from the heavens, it was precisely when they went from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, after having had the assurance of the chief priests and the scribes that Bethlehem was the place of birth.

I am aware that several learned German critics take the view set forth by E. F. B. The late Mr. Proctor, too, in his chapter on "The Star in the East" (*The Universe of Suns*: Chatto & Windus) declares that the "loss of the star" is in itself sufficient ground for rejecting the theory of a planetary conjunction, seeing that a planetary conjunction *could* not have been lost. But let us turn to the text for ourselves, and see if any necessity compels us to accept that reading.

In support of the "lost star" theory stress is laid on verses 9 and 10: "When they had heard the king they

departed ; and lo ! the star which they saw in the east went before them ” ; and “ they rejoiced with exceeding great joy ”—as though, having vanished after its first appearance, it now suddenly swam into their ken. In verse 7, however, there occurs a little phrase, the force of which is not felt in our English versions, but it must not be lost sight of as a point in the evidence : “ Herod . . . enquired diligently what time the star appeared.” In the Greek the expression is τὸν χρόνον τοῦ φαινομένου ἀστέρου—“ the time of the appearing star.” Now the real significance of this Greek participle cannot be expressed in any English participial form ; but, roughly speaking, the participle expresses a fact, and indicates the continuity of the fact. A distinguished Greek scholar has favoured me with what he regards as the nearest English equivalent of the passage in the following phrasing : “ Now as to the time of this star which, as you say, appears to you ? ” That is the sense a scholar would take out of the words if he met them in a Greek classic. The star did not appear once only, and that long ago ; it still appears.

Without laying undue emphasis on a nicety of language, I am prepared to take my stand on the obvious general sense of the narrative. St. Matthew, it is true, does not say that the star guided the Magi ; neither does he say that it vanished. He merely records the arrival of certain Wise Men who say that they had seen in the east a star, the forerunner of a royal birth. If I conceive that the celestial sign must have shone steadily in the heavens night after night, otherwise those Magi would never have set out on their quest, otherwise their faith would have failed them, and doubt, danger, and fatigue would have turned their faces home again, the Evangelist does not contradict me ; and the human probabilities of the story give some force to my speculations. As I travel with them in imagination, I see night after night the star marshalling us to the west,

till at last we reach Jerusalem. There they learn from Herod that the Messiah is to be born in Bethlehem,¹ and the wicked king bids them hasten thither and search diligently for the young child. They set out in the cool of the day; and again I accompany them and try to realize all they feel—the eager expectancy, the strange, vague hopes, the quick beating of the heart, the occasional doubt as to the success of this last stage of the journey, for now we are travelling no longer westward as heretofore, but almost due south. Can the wily king have deceived us, and sent us astray? Shall we find the wondrous Babe in the little town among the hills six miles off? Is it true? Is our long wandering so nearly done?

Through the grey hills we go: the sun sinks, the dusk gathers—and “lo! the star.” The star we saw in the east, the star which led us nightly across Tigris and Euphrates and through the deserts and over Jordan, which gave us assurance that we were not dreamers of wild dreams and foolish believers in fond traditions, the star goes before us, leads us still though our course be southward and no longer to the west; and we know that our search will not be fruitless.

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on!

Is it strange that we “rejoice with exceeding great joy”?
Possibly I may be too fanciful in my interpretation; but

¹ The Greek scholar to whom I have referred gives me the following note as to Herod's question to the priests: “He cannot mean, ‘Where is the Messiah being born *at this moment*?’ or again, ‘Where was He born’—some weeks or months ago? or yet again, ‘Where will He be born?’ His question, as I understand it, is more general—‘What is understood by your traditions and interpretations of Scripture to be the birthplace of the Messiah? Where is He to be born?’ It is nearly equivalent to the future, but not quite. It is something like the difference between (a) ‘When will there be an eclipse?’ and (b) ‘When is the (expected) eclipse to come off?’ ‘When *does* it come off?’” At the same time it is clear from the words “Search diligently” that Herod, impressed no doubt by the presence of the Magi and the story of the star, believed that the birth had actually taken place.

the Evangelist does not contradict me. In his fervid emotion does he not indeed justify me?

E. F. B. observes that such a stellar guidance as tradition describes "is scarcely conceivable," for this particular star would have moved, in common with all the stars, from east to west, and the Magi "would have had no indication that a special guidance was intended." The objection is shrewd, but it is the objection of one who is thinking of a modern astronomer, not of an ancient Oriental star gazer with his astrological fancies and his curious traditions of stellar influences and celestial portents. The star was conspicuous and marvellous enough to be recognised as "His star"; and if the Magi had a sufficient indication that a special summons for their journey was intended, we may reasonably conclude that they were also satisfied that a special guidance was guaranteed.

E. F. B.'s next objection is that when the Magi were on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem the star "went before them on a road which leads almost due south," and "such a course could not have been taken by any of the planets or fixed stars." But are we really bound down to taking the verbs of motion in the joyously lyrical language of verse 9 in a rigorously literal sense? Many a starry night I have followed a road leading due south, and over the road hung Betelgeux or Capella (westering with the others), and as I walked the star "went before me," and when I stopped it "stood" over farmstead or cottage. It was no strain of imagination to say that the star led me on; on the contrary, the optical illusion was so strong that while one was in motion one could scarcely help thinking of the star as advancing just as I myself advanced. No planet or fixed star, it is true, was ever known to revolve from north to south, but I see no reason to suppose that St. Matthew meant to say with absolute literalness that the star of Bethlehem moved in such a course.

In this connection it is interesting to note that in the work to which I have already referred Mr. Proctor does not raise this objection. On the contrary, writing of the brilliant planetary conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn, about December 5, B.C. 7, he states that if the Magi travelled to Bethlehem in that year and at that season of the year as evening was drawing in, they would have seen the conjoined planets shining over Bethlehem. "It is, in fact," he adds, "on this circumstance chiefly that the planetary conjunction theory of the star in the east has been based." Whether the planetary conjunction of the following year, or the "new star," the appearance of which has been conjectured, would have been visible to the Magi in a similar position, an astronomer has not sufficient data to decide. I can only hope that I have made out a fair case for accepting the narrative of St. Matthew in its natural, straightforward sense—at least in the meanwhile.

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